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ABSTRACT

Sweeping reforms within general education have brought radical changes to traditional writing requirements at many institutions around the country, in some cases extending to the elimination of those requirements. At Portland State University (Oregon), writing is now to be the province of those teaching in the new general education program. Many issues are raised when writing instruction and general education merge--or collide. New placement strategies and new ways of gathering outcomes for these strategies must be designed and displaced teaching assistants--renamed graduate assistants--reassigned within the English Department. A Writing Program Administrator (WPA) faces issues regarding budgetary resources commitment and funding which, rather than coming in a lump sum, has to be found through various funding sources according to the work done. The loss of writing requirements has transformed, but not done away with, the WPA's job and redefined the training and supervision of teaching assistants, whose duties each have different expectations, methodologies, and power structures than before. (CR)

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What Happens to the Writing Program Administrator When the Writing Requirements Go Away?

Recently, sweeping reforms within general education have brought radical changes to traditional writing requirements at many institutions around the country, extending even, in some cases, to the elimination of those requirements. Portland State currently finds itself at the forefront of these reforms. The crux of the changes are as follows: Writing is now to be the province of those teaching in the new general education program. Four major elements are expected to be common to all courses in the program, with an emphasis on four educational goals. The first and third goals are particularly relevant to the writing program. The first goal is communication defined to include writing as the core and the third goal is inquiry and critical thinking.

There are many issues raised when writing instruction and general education merge--or, as it may be, collide. Several transformations caused by the absorption of our writing requirements into the new curriculum are already apparent. We have, for example, had to design new placement strategies and new ways of gathering outcomes for these strategies. More difficult has been envisioning what we can do for and with displaced TAs and adjunct writing faculty. We have renamed TAs as Graduate Assistants or GAs. Rather than teaching only Freshman English, since the number of Freshman sections has dropped to four per quarter, GAs now have several roles within the writing program, the English Department, and the university. Several are writing assistants in the upper-division writing-intensive courses, several teach the upper-division writing course, several tutor in the writing center, some assist in large literature sections, a couple teach the Freshman Inquiry Communications course (a one-hour course in writing specifically meant to support

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the first-year general education students), and one works as Assistant Director of Writing. These transformations in GA roles have certainly changed our approach to training and supervision. There are other transformations beginning to arise, and the one I will concentrate on here is that which relates to my job as Director of Writing.

With the elimination of the writing requirements, I find myself wondering what our mission as a writing program is and what my role is as an administrator. I knew that my job as Director of Writing would be different from the way it was constituted prior to the changes in our program, but I wasn't sure what those differences would be. Since we are currently sustaining both the old and the new program, I remain somewhat unsure as to further transformations once the old writing requirements are completely phased out. We have thus far introduced the Freshman and Sophomore courses into the curriculum and will be closing out the second full year of the new program this spring. While the entirety of the new four-year program will be in place by 97-98, I will be continuing to balance both the old and new programs through 2001 since the life of the catalogue at Portland State is seven years.

When I first asked myself the question, "what does a writing program administrator do when there are no writing requirements?" I was able to imagine some probable scenarios. As most of us probably would, I foresaw myself acting as consultant, leading workshops on integrating writing into the general curriculum for those now responsible for teaching writing, looking for ways to ensure that sound and appropriate writing instruction continues, creating new writing electives within my home department, teaching more graduate-level courses in composition; and perhaps even teaching in the new program itself. No surprises here; I have been doing most of these things and will begin teaching in the new program during the 97-98 academic year. What I'd like to spend the rest of my time talking about are those things that have come as a surprise, things that I had not so readily imagined I'd be doing or facing.

First, let me raise some issues around funding. Perhaps I should have been prepared for the chaos I would be facing regarding budgetary resources and commitment, but I wasn't. With the loss of an overarching concept of writing instruction, we are facing a rather bizarre fragmentation of our budget. The previous Director of Writing, like many of you, was already in the less than perfect situation of having responsibility for the program but no authority over the budget. Resources for the required writing courses were allocated from a stash of soft money, term by term, to the Department Chair through the Dean's office. Every term the Chair, sometimes with (but usually without) the Director of Writing, would walk down the hall to the Dean's office to plead for money. While it was never enough, we would get enough money to limp along from term to term. This unfortunate situation continues, but this time with an even uglier twist.

There is no longer one lump sum given to cover the writing program. Instead, our budget is cobbled together from the various contingencies that we are now serving. For example, last summer our work with placement was paid for by student services, our work with faculty development by the Center for Excellence in Teaching, and the Writing Center was funded by the School of Extended Studies. But it was not until the summer session was over that we knew there would be at least some pay. One colleague, in fact, did not get paid until October. Even now the various controllers of funding sources continue to quibble over who is paying what. There are power plays taking place that we have no control over but that definitely have important consequences for us. One result is that I spend more time than before trying to convince deans that someone needs to take responsibility, tracking down elusive moneys, and generating budget proposals.

My second, though not unrelated surprise, has been in how much time I spend outside the department embroiled in university work and politics. While I could have predicted that more of my time would be spent outside the department at the university level, I had not imagined the numbers of requests I have had to do so--especially for committee work. Certainly I had expected to spend most of my time with faculty training.

However, even though we have made repeated offers to do faculty development follow-up training throughout the year, no entity--not the general education teachers, nor the Center for Academic Excellence--have taken us up on our offer. In part, this is because people are unbearably busy, but also because the appointed faculty leader for the Freshman Inquiry teachers has said repeatedly that they all know how to teach writing. Basically, the message has been a not so subtle "we don't think we need you."

Interestingly enough, however, the requests for my time in other places seems to belie the notion that writing isn't a complex and difficult issue for the new program. I have been asked to work on several ad hoc committees as well as the General Education Assessment Advisory board and the University Curriculum Committee. The Assessment Advisory board helps shape assessment of the new program and the University Curriculum Committee has final jurisdiction over determining whether the new program is putting together a curriculum that meets its own goals--including the communication goals of which writing is at the center. Additionally, I have been working on two other committees (called not by the Director of Writing but by others across the university) specifically constituted to address reading and writing issues. One committee is working on writing placement and the other on what to do with the students who are failing the new program from perceived lack of reading and writing abilities. Occasionally I succeed in getting these two committees to talk with each other. My reason for laying this out is simply to say that I spend between five and seven hours per week in meetings surrounding these issues. This does not include the time I spend doing other related things like writing new placement exams and creating new courses meant to ensure that struggling students have a place to go to get prepared for success in the program.

Again, while I suppose I shouldn't be, I am surprised by the various high-level administrators' lack of commitment to granting resources for courses, training, or placement. After all, I thought naively, I have been asked to consider ways of solving the problems underprepared students bring to the General Education courses. In the case of

placement and the newly proposed companion course I have recommended, both are needs created by new university requirements but not a single dean in control of money for specific university requirements is willing to commit funds--funds I might add that would come to under $30,000 a year. To be fair, I now know that the new program faces a $100,000 cut next year. But, the deans have even gone so far as to suggest writing placement and the corresponding courses should be an English department budgetary issue. I have a four word response for that one--"I don't think so." My latest stand has been a firm no resources, no placement and no course. If we go this route the consequences should be interesting. Last year we did conduct non-mandatory placement and made recommendations for at least those 900 students who came to orientation. With this limited placement, faculty are voicing deep concern over the lack of students' ability to read and write. Their concerns are likely to magnify with no placement.

Finally, I had not anticipated the ways in which the transformation of my job would impact my work with teaching assistants in the department. I find myself spending more time than previously trying to meet the needs of the TAs. Certainly, supervising TAs always takes part of the WPA's attention. What I am finding, however, is that as their roles have become diversified, their needs have changed and grown. Rather than teaching only Freshman English, TAs now have several roles within the Writing Program, the English department, and the university. The fact that they are no longer sharing the same teaching experience extends their training in valuable ways, but it also changes my approach to training and supervision. As we work together, we don't have the stabilizing factor of constructing teaching philosophies, syllabi, and core methodologies for a single course. Every teaching duty they are assigned has different expectations, different appropriate methodologies, sometimes very different time requirements, and almost always different power structures and hierarchies they have to traverse. I find myself doing a great deal more troubleshooting, in part because they feel a great deal of angst around the decentering of the writing program and their roles. As they find themselves in foreign

territory they want more concrete directives from me, but I am rarely able to give them the kind of handbook response they feel they need. I am scrambling right along with them, trying desperately to prepare them for roles that are still creating themselves.

The standard workload for WPAs is almost always unbearable but also almost always fairly routine. The channels for the work of the WPA to happen are reasonably well in place. The loss of writing requirements has transformed my job, but not done away with it. I survive through fluidity; I am in the position of inventing new channels as I go.

While everything that I have said today might seem negative, it isn't. Right now my job is a like wild ride at the carnival, about as predictable as the weather. But it also exciting, innovative, and critically important within both the department and the university.